

THE VOICES OF THE YOUNG

Sermon at a Service for the Worcestershire County Council

Readings: Isaiah 40. 27-31; St Matthew 11. 25-30.

THE Chapter House, to which you are all invited for refreshments after this service, was built at the beginning of the twelfth century, and is the prototype of the great circular chapter houses of England. Westminster Abbey, York Minster, Salisbury, and Lincoln, all followed the Worcester plan. It was built soon after the death of our saintly bishop, Wulfstan, and it is reasonable to think that the plan was his. So why the circular design? There is a passage in the Rule of St Benedict, the rule by which the monks lived and a chapter of which was read every day in the 'Chapter House', which speaks of how the community is to be governed. For unimportant matters, says St Benedict, the abbot need consult only the older monks; but for important matters, he must consult the whole community. But this is not an exercise in democracy; rather, says St Benedict, it is because God might choose to speak through the youngest member present.¹ So we may imagine Bishop Wulfstan asking himself, 'How can I make a chapter house in which everyone has an equal voice? I must make it round, and we must sit in a circle'. So there it is: one of England's noble buildings, designed specifically for the voice of the young to be heard.

Members of the County Council, the theme of this service is promoting and encouraging young people, and Bishop Wulfstan's question is as relevant to us as it was to him: how shall the voice of the young be heard? And what do they say to those of us who are – well, not so young? There's something absurd about a man of my age answering that question, but as I look at the world in which my children have grown up, and in which my grandchildren are beginning to grow up, let me hazard a few things I think I see in the brightest and best of our young people.

Humanitarianism. Many schools, colleges, and universities have an impressive record of voluntary charitable fundraising and social awareness. For the young who engage in that with enthusiasm, it goes without saying that we are one global family.

¹ *Rule of St Benedict*, ch. iii.

Internationalism. Neither youth, nor the social media by which so many young people live their lives, knows national boundaries; and the strident nationalism that has marked their elders' generation is incomprehensible. We are one global family.

Inclusivism. The gender battles, the class battles, the disability battles, and the race battles which have scarred society in our lifetime are meaningless to the young. We are one global family.

The seriousness and urgency of the climate crisis, and all the associated environmental issues. The rest of us are shamed by the voices of the young. We are one global family, inhabiting one planet.

Well, those are some of the voices of the young I think I hear; and if I am right, then the world has some grounds for hope; and if I am wrong, then I'm not sure we have much hope at all. But if those *are* some of the voices of the young, then they are in danger of being drowned out by the tragic events unfolding at this moment in Ukraine. A humanitarian crisis on a growing scale, the political and economic destabilising of the world, the pitting of one sovereign state against another, the threat of nuclear catastrophe (whether accidental or deliberate), and the fatal distraction from the urgency of the climate crisis: here we see old men – or one old man – trampling on the dreams and hopes and aspirations of the young. As T.S. Eliot wrote in one of his poems: 'Do not let me hear / Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly ...' And he goes on: 'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility'.² But for the people of Ukraine, and perhaps for all of us, it may be too late to learn that lesson.

What can we do? Little, it seems; but at least something. A million people have fled Ukraine: many more will follow. We have witnessed the scenes of families torn apart at railway stations. Hundreds of thousands of children are now without home or shelter.

The Vice-Chancellor of the University, Professor David Green, has reminded me of words of William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of the Second World War. Temple was speaking in the House of Lords urging immediate assistance and asylum to refugees from Nazi Germany. Let me tell you a little of what the Archbishop said in that speech:

'We know that what we can do will be but little in comparison with the need. My whole plea on behalf of those for whom I am speaking is that whether what we do be large or little it should at least be *all we can do*.

² T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 'East Coker', II.

‘We [may say] that we are not responsible for this great evil, that the burden lies on others, but it is always true that the obligations of decent [people] are decided for them by ... the action of [the] wicked. The priest and the Levite in the parable were not in the least responsible for the traveller’s wounds as he lay there by the roadside, and no doubt they had many other pressing things to attend to, but they stand as the picture of those who are condemned for neglecting the opportunity of showing mercy. We at this moment have upon us a tremendous responsibility. We stand at the bar of history, of humanity and of God.’³ Thus Archbishop Temple in 1943. And the Europe of 1943 has become the Europe of 2022.

I hope that all of us here today are on the side of welcoming the homeless and the refugee, whatever the cost or inconvenience to ourselves. Another chapter of the Rule of St Benedict, read daily in our chapter house all those centuries ago, said that everyone who arrived on the threshold of the monastery was to be received as if they were Christ himself. That is the ideal by which this Cathedral seeks to live today, hard as it is to put into practice, and easy as it is to fail. A year ago the Cathedral Chapter was able to offer accommodation in some of our properties to two Afghan families. Now we must look for other practical ways to help those who may come to us from Ukraine. But if it’s a matter of opening our homes to refugees, well, my wife and I live in a house larger than we need, and I know what St Benedict would say about that.

Some years ago, in improbable circumstances which it would take too long to explain, I met Volodymyr Zelensky and his wife, when he ran a satirical news programme in Ukraine, much disapproved of by the then government. Whenever I see his brave, dignified, care-worn face on television today, I am left wondering what I can do to help the people he leads, especially the young who will now grow up in a world not of their making. The little I can do, the little we all can do, is perhaps a way to redeem the folly of old men, and offer to the young such hope as it is still in our power to give.

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Preached at Evensong in Worcester Cathedral on Sunday 6 March 2022, attended by the Chair and Members of the County Council.

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³ Hansard, *House of Lords Debates*, 23 March 1943, vol. 126, cc 811-60.